

## Faith and Inspiration

## Sokath, his eyes uncovered

## - On Biblical Translation and Interpretation -

One of the standout episodes of the television series "Star Trek: The Next Generation" involves the starship Enterprise's contact with an alien species, the Tamarians, whose language relies exclusively on metaphorical phrases and mythical references.

Even though the techno-magical "universal translator" device can convert the actual alien words into standard human speech (i.e., English), the meaning and context remain elusive. A discussion among the crew reveals the crux of the matter.



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size" the text, perhaps out of habit in handling other forms of literature. While this may be regarded as a legitimate attempt at application, it has the potential to further obscure comprehension. It would be more useful to keep in mind the essential purpose of parables: to promote a singular lesson or truth. A parable is not some grand, multi-layered, volume-spanning, epic drama, but rather a concise, compact story that can be easily remembered and is readily impactful. Recognizing the nature of the literary form can be very

neighbor," Jesus elevates the conversation back to that of inheriting eternal life. By compelling the questioner to realize that the one who showed compassion was the true neighbor, Jesus forces him to begin realizing that he is not capable of fulfilling that summary of the Law in his own power, that it is necessary to transcend the Law, and that he cannot in fact redeem himself.

A final example of interpretation that likely extends beyond the framework of the content is the commonly referenced "parable of talents" (Matthew 25). The conventional inclination is to identify appropriate symbology behind the descriptions of the master, the servants, and the talents (defined literally as weight measure of precious metals), and to read spiritual meaning into the behaviors of each party in the story. What many sometimes find incongruent or even disturbing is the harsh censure and condemnation by the master to the servant who does not accrue the value of the wealth entrusted to him — which seems to affirm the servant's perception of the master as a "hard man." If one attempts to read this allegorically, one might be led to conclude that that the master represents God, and that followers who do not increase the value of their subject of stewardship will be sentenced to "outer darkness." A key to effective interpretation here is to again emphasize that, firstly, this is a parable rather than a direct metaphor; also, that this is but one in a sequence of related parables that Jesus is using to highlight and underscore certain truths regarding the coming of the Son of Man and the kingdom of heaven. A practical approach is to perceive the parable of talents as a whole in comparison and contrast to the passage that follows, which identifies the Son of Man on his throne, separating sheep from goats; commending those who attended to the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned, and condemning those who failed to satisfy or even see such needs because of their self-righteous spiritual blindness. Ultimately, the parable is a summary of the world's priorities and measures of success (the master is only concerned with how much his servants can increase his existing wealth), while in the kingdom of heaven, the Son of Man judges how well those who claim to be followers live out the gospel toward others. In both narratives there is a representation of strict consequences for those who fail to fulfill expectations. In the case of the Son of Man, the severity seems more in keeping with a sense of justice and impartiality. Again, the theme is that the no one can redeem themselves, that everyone needs the redemption proclaimed in the gospel.

One can readily make the argument that the goal of parables in the gospel accounts is to support the overarching message of the gospel itself — that is, our spiritual shortcomings and need for salvation, and God's provision for fulfilling it.

As in the case of the crew of the Enterprise and their encounter with the Tamarians, translation usually requires interpretation to achieve understanding. If we are honest, we will concede that some of our modern readings and renderings of Scripture suffer from inadequate or perhaps incomplete interpretation. While we may be blessed (some might claim inundated) with numerous translations of the Bible into English, that does not necessarily guarantee that we will automatically deduce the authentic meaning of the text. Of course, as believers we accept the premise that the Holy Spirit can guide us to truth and aid in that interpretation, but that does not obviate the need to apply our ability to investigate, contemplate, and evaluate.

As the Scripture exhorts in various passages, study of the Word — the text itself, as well as the person of Jesus — will prove beneficial to the spiritual development of a believer.

*\* a metaphor for comprehension in the Tamarian language*

**TROI:** It's as if I were to say to you, "Juliet on her balcony."

**CRUSHER:** An image of romance.

**TROI:** Exactly. Imagery is everything to the Tamarians. It embodies their emotional states, their very thought processes. It's how they communicate, and it's how they think.

**RIKER:** If we know how they think, shouldn't we be able to get something across to them?

**DATA:** No, sir. The situation is analogous to understanding the grammar of a language but none of the vocabulary.

**CRUSHER:** If I didn't know who Juliet was or what she was doing on that balcony, the image alone wouldn't have any meaning.

Some sources suggest that God chose the original languages of Scripture because of their distinct and practical qualities. Ancient Hebrew was highly precise and rigorous in its composition and arrangement. New Testament Greek represented a common, ubiquitous language that was effective in supporting trade and mediation in the multicultural environment of its day. These characteristics undoubtedly served to help maintain and disseminate the text of Scripture throughout the expanse of geography and time. The Bible's potency has benefited from remarkable efforts in translation from those original languages.

A debate on the "best" or "correct" English translation of the Bible is well beyond the scope of this present article. Suffice it to say that translation availability is not an issue. Part of a Christian's foundational understanding of Scripture is that its initial delivery and composition was fully inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21), and that we are strongly encouraged by Scripture itself to make a deliberate effort to study it, and to rely on the Holy Spirit for the insight and understanding that we seek (John 14:26, John 16:13-14, 2 Corinthians 2:13-14, 2 Timothy 2:15).

While some portions of the Biblical text might lend themselves readily to straightforward translation and interpretation, there are other passages which not only present complexities in translation from an ancient to modern language, but also demand more definitive insight into the cultural and linguistic contexts in which they were originally formulated for effective interpretation. In the case of parables, this can be especially true where exact analogs between ancient and modern concepts and assumptions might not be apparent.

Some of the more "popular" or well-known parables of Jesus have come to retain certain interpretations based on suppositions which may not be entirely supported from the original language and setting; or we may at times miss the significance of the symbolism or details that Jesus utilizes because we may not possess a point of reference common with the first century crowds that converged on him. Indeed, it is not unusual to observe some rather "loose" or creative explanations and applications of Biblical passages based on well-intentioned but potentially misguided underlying assumptions of modern minds.

Many modern readers tend to want to "spiritualize" or "allego-

helpful in guiding our efforts at interpretation.

A brief summary of some customary parable analyses may exemplify the complications and imperfections of interpretations that emerge from available translations.

Very often, people scrutinize the parable of the "prodigal son" (Luke 15) by attempting to derive significance from the various details: the son demanding his inheritance presently; his descent into a wasteful lifestyle; the father running to meet the son upon his return; the older son's resentment, and so on. However, since these are parables, not allegories, it is not necessary to extract corresponding symbolism for each specific aspect. A more comprehensive look at the surrounding text reveals that this story appears as a culmination of Jesus's response to a complaint by the Pharisees (those who relied on their own attempts at righteousness) that he was consorting with "sinners." His simple message to them is that God rejoices when sinners repent. Jesus progressively emphasizes through the stories of a lost sheep, coin, and son, that the genuine spiritual renewal exhibited by the so-called sinners among them is more precious to God than the arrogant self-righteousness of the practitioners of the Law, because the sinners recognize their need for redemption.

Another favorite parable is the one identified as "the good Samaritan" (Luke 10), a brief tale presented by Jesus in response to an inquiry about identifying who is our neighbor (essentially, who deserves love) by someone who, according to the text, wanted to "justify himself" to Jesus. The implication is that this individual, an expert in the Mosaic Law, possessed the attitude that he was already sufficiently fulfilling the requirements to "inherit eternal life," the subject of his initial question. Jesus had just affirmed that the summary of "love God, love your neighbor" was correct, but the man felt it necessary to further challenge Jesus. Again, many have over-analyzed this parable to ascribe varying magnitudes of relevance and emphasis to individual elements — the degree of violence perpetrated, the avoidance by the priest and Levite, the amount of payment to the innkeeper, etc. Jesus regularly utilized certain character or object models at least partly for shock value, to gain his audience's attention and provoke honest reactions and reflections. A strictly Jewish audience might be alarmed that Jesus would hold up a Samaritan, a common target of prevailing prejudice, as a model of righteous behavior, but was he only interested in subverting expectations or upsetting sensibilities? Beyond a somewhat simplistic platitude of breaching cultural boundaries, Jesus was ultimately answering the original question: how to inherit eternal life. At the conclusion of the parable, rather than simply answering the somewhat condescending query of "who is my

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In an effort to promote the Homestead Chapter of the American Legion Auxiliary has a month they will donate a new exchange for their old

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American flags ready off at located at the Po Homestead.

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